



1-17-2018

Visualizing Native People in Philadelphia's Museums: Public Views and Student Reviews

Margaret Bruchac

University of Pennsylvania, mbruchac@sas.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.upenn.edu/anthro_papers



Part of the [Archaeological Anthropology Commons](#), and the [Museum Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bruchac, M. (2018). Visualizing Native People in Philadelphia's Museums: Public Views and Student Reviews. *Penn Museum Blog*, Retrieved from https://repository.upenn.edu/anthro_papers/174

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. https://repository.upenn.edu/anthro_papers/174

For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

Visualizing Native People in Philadelphia's Museums: Public Views and Student Reviews

Abstract

Material representations of Indigenous history in public museums do more than merely present the past. Exhibitions are always incomplete and idiosyncratic, revealing only a small window into the social worlds of diverse human communities. Museums create, in essence, staged assemblages: compositions of objects, documents, portraits, and other material things that have been filtered through an array of influences. These influences—museological missions, collection processes, curatorial choices, loan possibilities, design concepts, research specialties, funding options, consultant opinions, space limitations, time limits, logistical challenges, etc.—will be unique for each museum and each collection. Taken together, they will inevitably determine which objects are selected for display, what events will take precedence, how cultural interactions will be re-conceptualized, and whose stories will be told.

Disciplines

Anthropology | Archaeological Anthropology | Museum Studies | Social and Behavioral Sciences



VISUALIZING NATIVE PEOPLE IN PHILADELPHIA'S MUSEUMS: PUBLIC VIEWS AND STUDENT REVIEWS

By: [Margaret Bruchac](#)

January 17, 2018

Material representations of Indigenous history in public museums do more than merely present the past. Exhibitions are always incomplete and idiosyncratic, revealing only a small window into the social worlds of diverse human communities. Museums create, in essence, staged assemblages: compositions of objects, documents, portraits, and other material things that have been filtered through an array of influences. These influences—museological missions, collection processes, curatorial choices, loan possibilities, design concepts, research specialties, funding options, consultant opinions, space limitations, time limits, logistical challenges, etc.—will be unique for each museum and each collection. Taken together, they will inevitably determine which objects are selected for display, what events will take precedence, how cultural interactions will be re-conceptualized, and whose stories will be told.



Stephanie Mach at Penn Treaty Park in Philadelphia. The text on the stone reads, in part: "While other colonies were in conflict and in great distress with the Indians, William Penn through his philosophy of social justice and peace, engaged their friendship and goodwill...the wampum belt represents the great treaty of amity." Photo by Margaret Bruchac.

During the fall semester of 2017, students in the “Anthropology of Museums” class at the University of Pennsylvania toured a selection of museums in Philadelphia, to examine how these museums represent local histories in public exhibits. Our visits included several museums in Old City that highlight colonial American histories, most notably the American Philosophical Society, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, and the Museum of the American Revolution. The class also visited sites that function less obviously as museums, including City Tavern and Welcome Park. In each locale, we observed, not just objects, but relationships among objects and subjects, and curators and audiences. We learned a great deal about history, and also gained better understandings of the entanglements among, for example, the American Philosophical Society, the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences, and the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (Penn Museum).

In each museum, Penn students interviewed curators, looked into behind-the-scenes collections, and studied the exhibits on display. They composed critical reviews of each exhibit by analyzing the particularities of content, themes, audience, message, design, interpretive strategies, and cultural representations vis-à-vis specific individuals and objects. To write their blog articles, students selected objects, documents, or other material on display that reveal unique insights into particular collectors, curators, and communities. They also focused on specific strategies used to make certain people and objects visible in public museums. Their reviews can be found on the Penn Museum blog (see links below).

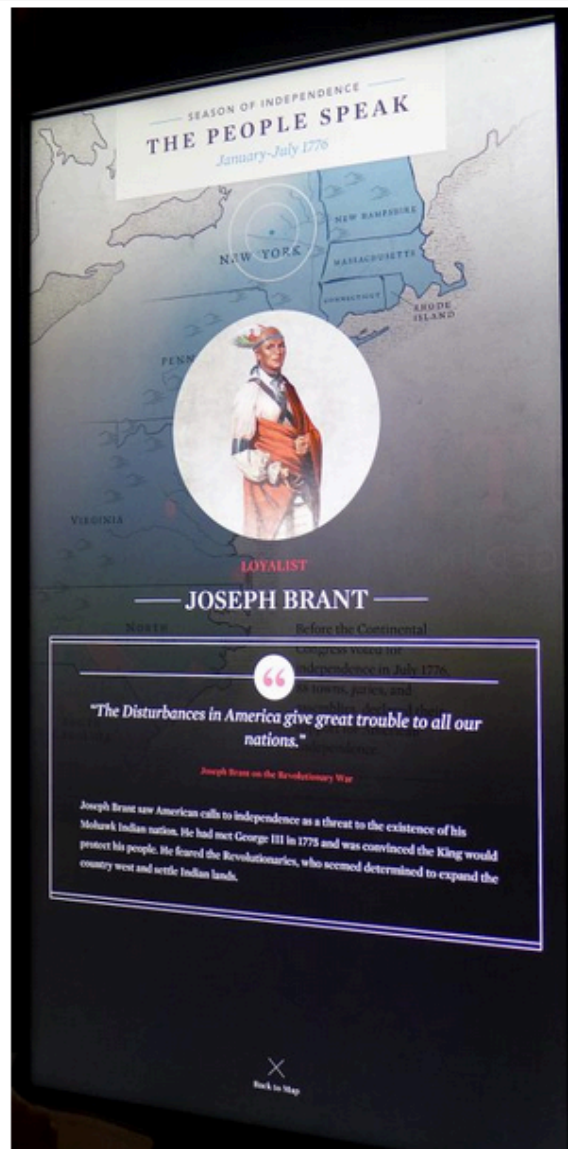
Native Visibilities and Invisibilities

Native people, histories, and objects—which might seem essential to any re-telling of Philadelphia’s history—were visible in some exhibits, and hidden in others. For example, the newest institution in Old City, the [Museum of the American Revolution](#) (MAR), has an entire gallery dedicated to interpreting the Oneida Indian Nation’s decision to ally with the American colonies.^[1] The MAR staff collaborated with the Oneida to construct an exhibit that pays careful attention to that nation’s history, past and present.

Yet, at the same time, there is minimal discussion of the equally crucial diplomatic negotiations and treaty-making efforts with other members of the Haudenosaunee Six Nations Confederacy. Nor is there any representation of the Lenape communities that were displaced by their colonial allies.

Museums, naturally, tend to focus on particular areas of interest to the exclusion of others. The [American Philosophical Society’s](#) (APS) exhibition on Charles Willson Peale’s Philadelphia Museum, housed in the APS’s Philosophical Hall, offers brilliant insight into the Peale family. It reveals the underpinnings of a ground-breaking museum founded in the late 1700s that transcended a cabinet of curiosities to introduce viewers to the natural wonders of the American continent.^[2]

Peale, in his time, displayed portraits of Native American leaders alongside his collection of roughly 800 “Indian costumes and artifacts,” but many of those items were lost when the museum burned.^[3]





Cabinets in the “Curious Revolutionaries” Peale exhibition at the American Philosophical Society Museum, including a small display of so-called “Specimens of the Stone Age.” Photo by Lise Puyo.

The current exhibition shows none of these; Native people are only represented by a mute cabinet of lithics (stone tools) collected by Benjamin Franklin Peale and identified as “Specimens of the Stone Age.” To most visitors, these will evoke no sense of living Native people, then or now.^[4]

Philadelphia’s origins are inextricably entangled with Native diplomacy, and so, fittingly, there are objects, statues, murals, and monuments that commemorate William Penn’s treaty with Chief Tamanend of the local Lenape (Delaware) nation. The riverside site of Shackamaxon where the treaty was said to have been transacted under an elm tree has been designated as “Penn Treaty Park;” it hosts statues and plaques honoring Penn, the wampum belt, and even the elm tree itself. The most memorable depiction of that event is Benjamin West’s (re-invented) painting, [“Penn’s Treaty with the Indians”](#) (1771-1772), which visually sets the stage for a potentially peaceful era of colonial territorial expansion. But the treaty did not last, the expansion was not peaceful, and Native people did not disappear from the scene.^[5]

Throughout the 1700s, and into the 1790s, when the capital of the new United States was located in Philadelphia, the State House (now Independence Hall) hosted diplomats from multiple Native nations: Cherokee, Creek, Haudenosaunee (Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Seneca, Tuscarora), Ottawa, Shawnee, Wyandot, and many others. At times, local artists painted their portraits and sketched them into scenes.^[6] See, for example, William Russell Birch’s illustration of four unnamed Native visitors in [“Back of the State House Philadelphia,”](#) Among the paintings of Charles Willson Peale, there is an enigmatic portrait of Mohawk war leader [Thayendanegea/Joseph Brant](#).^[7] These images offer tantalizing glimpses into this past.

Old City’s Wampum Lot

Apart from political meetings, Native people came into the city regularly to shop for trade goods, to sell ash-spint baskets, or to meet with the Society of Friends (Quakers), who had formed “the Friendly Association for regaining and preserving Peace with the Indians.”^[8] One local historian recalled: “Old people have told me that the visits of Indians were so frequent as to excite but little surprise.” At one of the treaty-making events in 1749, “there was at the State-house an assemblage of two hundred and sixty Indians: of eleven different tribes, assembled there with the governor to make a treaty. The place was extremely crowded.” On other occasions, nearly 500 Native people gathered just outside the city, and “remained several days at Logan’s place, in his beech woods.”^[9]



Engraving by William Russell Birch, "[Back of the State House Philadelphia](#)," 1800, accession # 1876.9.24b, John S. Phillips Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art. Four Native American visitors can be seen in the foreground; Peale's Museum and Philosophical Hall can be seen in the background.

Native leaders visited so frequently that John Penn (grandson of William Penn) asked the Provincial Council to consider designating a place for diplomatic encounters, since Native delegations often "refused to negotiate a treaty or even talk about it, until they could stand on their own ground, and build a council-fire on their own land."[\[10\]](#)

In January 1755, Mohawk chief [Hendrick/Theyanoguin](#) was invited to Philadelphia to help settle disputes over the sales of tribal lands to Connecticut speculators. During that visit, Penn is said to have given Hendrick a wampum belt to mark an agreement to set aside a plot of land (identified in memory as the "Wampum Lot") in perpetuity for the conduct of Native diplomacy.[\[12\]](#) The site was roughly one square city block in size, situated not far from the Delaware River, a few blocks from the State House, and across the street from City Tavern. The lot was not (as some imagine) an "Indian reservation," and Native delegates did not necessarily camp there.[\[13\]](#) Like other political visitors to Philadelphia, they were often lodged in nearby inns (with colorful names like "The Indian King" and "The Indian Queen") or in rooms on the upper floor of the State House.

Portrait of Hendrick/Theyanoguin, John Carter Library. [\[11\]](#)



In the years after the American Revolution, diplomacy with Native nations shifted dramatically, since most of the Haudenosaunee (Cayuga, Mohawk, Onondaga, and Seneca) had remained in alliance with Great Britain. Yet, Native diplomats continued to visit the city until around 1800, while the capital of the new United States was located in Philadelphia. After the War of 1812, many Haudenosaunee families left western Pennsylvania and New York state to relocate to Ontario, Canada; some of the Lenape went with them.[\[14\]](#)

In 1865, when a group of Philadelphia citizens proposed to build on the Wampum Lot, they learned that the Oneida still claimed the land, and that “the wampum belt established a proprietary right given by the commonwealth.” Charles Knecht asked Seneca Civil War veteran Ely Parker for assistance, but Parker found that, “nothing could induce the Oneidas to give up the belt or surrender the title to the property.” Nonetheless, the Chamber claimed title to the lot. Tall brick buildings now occupy most of the space.[\[15\]](#)

Re-Presenting the Past

In 1922, the city was reminded of the Wampum Lot’s history by a small delegation of Native leaders at an event organized, in part, by University of Pennsylvania anthropologist Frank Speck. Speakers included Chief Albert Shenandoah (Oneida), Chief Mountpleasant (Tuscarora), Chief Strong Wolf (Ojibwa), Chief Red Fox (Blackfeet), Gladys Tantaquidgeon (Mohegan), and White Cloud (Mohawk). The event included formal speeches by city officials and it was attended by members of the Friends’ Meeting and the Philadelphia chapter of the Boy Scouts.[\[16\]](#)

But Philadelphia’s public memory of Native space was fragile. By 1982, the city had transformed what was left of the Wampum Lot into “[Welcome Park](#),” an outdoor park that, although it depicts the seventeenth century history of William Penn and his land transactions with the Lenape, makes no mention whatsoever of Native diplomacy at the site in the centuries thereafter.[\[17\]](#)

If histories of Native people in the past seem elusive, Native people in the present are also difficult to locate in local museums. The [Historical Society of Pennsylvania](#), for example, seems to have little information on Native people in any era of Philadelphia history until one discovers that they house the papers from the mid-twentieth century [United American Indians of the Delaware River Valley \(UNAIDRV\)](#). This urban Indian Center was the home to a vital inter-tribal community that, beginning in 1974, hosted social services, including adult education workshops, job training, counseling, housing referrals, arts and crafts workshops, senior services, and social events for urban Native Americans. People came to UNAIDRV from many different nations; at one time there were over 550 Native members from more than 30 different tribes. UNAIDRV hosted a Native American Theater, Creative Craft Circle, Philadelphia Native American Museum and Gift Shop in the building it owned at 225 Chestnut Street.[\[18\]](#) But all of that activity came to a halt when the organization folded after 2004. The black and white photos preserved in the archives show faces that, although they were once full of hope, are now isolated and unidentified.[\[19\]](#)

A refreshing counterpoint to this kind of erasure can be found in the Penn Museum, where the present-day Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape nation can be seen, along with a selection of contemporary Native American artists from around the country, in the “[Native American Voices: The People, Here and Now](#)” exhibition.[\[20\]](#) The Penn Museum also has elements of the distant Native American past on display. As the new “[Moundbuilders: Ancient Architects of North America](#)” exhibition demonstrates, portrayals of the Native past need not be imagined as a primitive and conceptually inaccessible “stone age.” Those portrayals can include information about contemporary Native nations, such as the Eastern Band of Cherokee who regard the ancient mounds in their homelands as sacred sites today.[\[21\]](#)

Some of Philadelphia’s outdoor museums are also becoming sites for a revitalized presence. In 2015, for example, a delegation of tribal leaders from North and South America gathered at the Wampum Lot/Welcome Park site. The speakers—including Rev. John Norwood of the Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape; Chief Sid Hill, Tadadaho of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy; Tupac Enrique Acosta from the Embassy of Indigenous Peoples, and Paul Ricker from the Society of Friends and Philadelphia Yearly Meeting—read a declaration to commit to peacefully working together to respect Native lands and peoples.[\[22\]](#)

There is much more to be said about the recovery of Native memories in Philadelphia, but one over-arching impression is this: museums need to do a better job of representing relationships, not just in the past, and not just between collectors and collections, but between and among living communities. The nuances of historical encounters are entangled with so many questions. Who, exactly, agreed to the land sales in Penn’s treaty? How are the Lenape associated with the Six Nations, then and now? Why, if Penn’s settlement was so peaceful, did so many Native families leave their homelands to move so far away?



Indigenous gathering at the Wampum Lot, September 24, 2015. (left-right) Betty Lyons, Tupac Enrique Acosta, Felix Diaz, Ari Maco, Lola Marina, Shannon Rivers, Angela Mooney D'Arcy, Chief Sid Hill, Rev. John Norwood. Photo by Margaret Bruchac.

Even when material evidence seems to be scarce, there are multiple opportunities for reviving Native memories in Philadelphia. Gaps in local memory can be addressed by calling attention to the complexities of colonial experiences and the resonance of those events in the present. So, for example, Pennsylvania is still considered to be a crucial locale in the traditional homeland of Lenape people in Oklahoma—such as the [Delaware Tribe of Indians](#) and the [Delaware Nation](#)—despite their history of having been forced to relocate outside of the area.^[23] Museums can avoid popular stereotypes of vanished Indians by placing the emphasis on Indigenous homelands, knowledges, and continuities, and by collaborating with contemporary Indigenous peoples and nations. If we thoughtfully revisit and reconsider the distinct objects, monuments, and sites that evoke these memories, we might begin to better understand who the Native people were who lived these histories in Philadelphia, why they were so insistent on making speeches and posing for portraits, and where their descendants are today.

Sources Cited:

[1] For the Penn student review of the Museum of the American Revolution, see Anastasia Hutnick, “All the Museum’s a Stage, and All the Visitors Players: Theatricality in the Museum of the American Revolution,” in *Beyond the Gallery Walls*, Penn Museum Blog, December 2017. For another critical review of this museum, see Jennifer Schuessler, [“A New Museum of the American Revolution, Warts and All,”](#) *New York Times*, April 13, 2017.

[2] For the Penn student review of this American Philosophical Society exhibition, see Sheridan Small, “Inquisitive Students: A Review of ‘Curious Revolutionaries’ at the American Philosophical Society,” in *Beyond the Gallery Walls*, Penn Museum Blog, December 2017.

[3] Charles Coleman Sellers, “Peale’s Museum,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 43, no. 1 (1953): 253-259.

[4] Text from the notebook of Benjamin Franklin Peale, “Curious Revolutionaries: The Peale of Philadelphia,” American Philosophical Society Museum.

[5] For a discussion of West’s painting and the works inspired by it, see the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, *Symbols of Peace: William Penn’s Treaty with the Indians: An Exhibition Sponsored by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and Dickinson College: The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, May 12-September 26* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 1976). For further reading on Native relations in Philadelphia, see William Pencak and Daniel K. Richter, eds. *Friends and Enemies in Penn’s Woods: Colonists, Indians, and the Racial Construction of Pennsylvania* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).

[6] Charles Coleman Sellers, ““Good Chiefs and Wise Men:’ Indians as Symbols of Peace in the Art of Charles Willson Peale,” *The American Art Journal* 7, no. 2 (November 1975): 10-18.

[7] Painting of Joseph Brant/Thayendenagea (1742-1807) by Charles Willson Peale, c. 1797, INDE 11880, Second Bank of the United States, Independence National Park, National Park Service.

[8] John F. Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania, in the olden time; being a collection of memoirs, anecdotes, and incidents of the city and its inhabitants and of the earliest settlements of the inland part of Pennsylvania, from the days of the founders*. Vol. II (Philadelphia, PA: King & Baird, 1850), 166, 206. Also see Friendly Association Papers and Pemberton Family Papers, in Quaker & Special Collections, Haverford College.

[9] Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania, in the olden time*, 163.

[10] The logic of having a place to “build a council fire” is recalled in Amelia Mott Gummere, *The Quaker in the Forum* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston Co., 1910), 131.

[11] The caption on this engraving reads: “The brave old Hendrick the great Sachem or Chief of the Mohawk Indians, one of the Six Nations now in Alliance with. & Subject to the King of Great Britain.” This hand-tinted engraving, published in London in 1755 and “Sold by Eliz. Bakewell opposite Birch Lane in Cornhill,” is based on an earlier portrait, perhaps the one said to have been painted by William Williams in Philadelphia in 1755. [Accession #32623, EN74 B169b](#) in the JCB Archive of Early American Images, at the John Carter Brown Library, Brown University.

[12] L.R. Hamersly, ed., *The United Service* Vol. XIV new series (Philadelphia, PA: L.R. Hamersly Co., 1895), 377-378. For more information on Theyanoguin/Hendrick (c. 1680-1755), see Milton W. Hamilton, “[Theyanoguin](#),” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. III (University of Toronto/Université Laval, 1974–2017).

[13] The misleading notion of the site as an Indian “reservation” was suggested by Harry Kyriakodis, “[Before Even Old Original Bookbinder’s: An Official Indian Reservation](#),” *Hidden City Philadelphia* (October 24, 2013).

[14] For a brief overview of the shifting movements of Haudenosaunee bands and nations in the late eighteenth-early nineteenth centuries, see Alan Taylor, “The Divided Ground: Upper Canada, New York, and the Iroquois Six Nations, 1783-1815,” *Journal of the Early Republic* Vol. 22 no. 1 (Spring 2002): 55-75.

[15] Anonymous, “The Philadelphia Chamber Of Commerce Overcomes A Wampum-Belt Title,” *The American Architect and Building News* 36 (May 28, 1892), 140.

[16] *Bulletin of the Friends Historical Association* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1923), 24-26.

[17] “[Welcome Park](#)” was designed and developed as a public historical site by the Friends of Independence National Historical Park, in 1982.

[18] [United American Indians of the Delaware River Valley, Inc., Records](#). Collection 3048 and Collection SPC 406, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

[19] For the Penn student review of this museum, see Malkia Okech, “Hidden Histories at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania,” in *Beyond the Gallery Walls*, Penn Museum Blog, December 2017.

[20] See, for example, Lucy Fowler Williams, “[Dance with Me: The Nanticoke Leni-Lenape Indians of New Jersey](#)” video, produced for the Penn Museum in 2011.

[21] For the Penn student review of this Penn Museum exhibition, see Katherine C. Ku, “Moundbuilders: A Physical Reflection of Cultural Significance at the Penn Museum,” in *Beyond the Gallery Walls*, Penn Museum Blog, December 2017.

[22] Paula Palmer, “[Proclamation of the Continental Commission of the Great Turtle Island, Abya Yala](#),” regarding the reading of the Declaration against the Doctrine of Discovery at the Wampum Lot aka Welcome Park, September 24, 2015.

[23] The direct descendants of the historical Leni-Lenape people (also called Delaware Indians) include the federally-recognized tribal nations of the Delaware Tribe of Indians in Bartlesville, Oklahoma and the Delaware Nation in Anadarko, Oklahoma, in addition to some family groups located in New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Ontario, and elsewhere.

For further discussion of the history and resonance of the Wampum Lot, see:

- Margaret Bruchac: “[Tangled Memories of Wampum Diplomacy in Philadelphia](#),” On the Wampum Trail website, December 2017.

For Further Museum Reviews, See the 2017 Penn Student Articles:

- Anastasia Hutnick: “[All the Museum’s a Stage, and All the Visitors Players: Theatricality in the Museum of the American Revolution](#)”
- Katherine Ku: “[Moundbuilders: A Physical Reflection of Cultural Significance at the Penn Museum](#)”
- Malkia Okech: “[Hidden Histories at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania](#)”
- Sheridan Small: “[Inquisitive Students: A Review of “Curious Revolutionaries” at the American Philosophical Society](#)”

Accessed on-line May 1, 2018 at:

<https://www.penn.museum/blog/museum/visualizing-native-people-in-philadelphias-museums-public-views-and-student-reviews/>